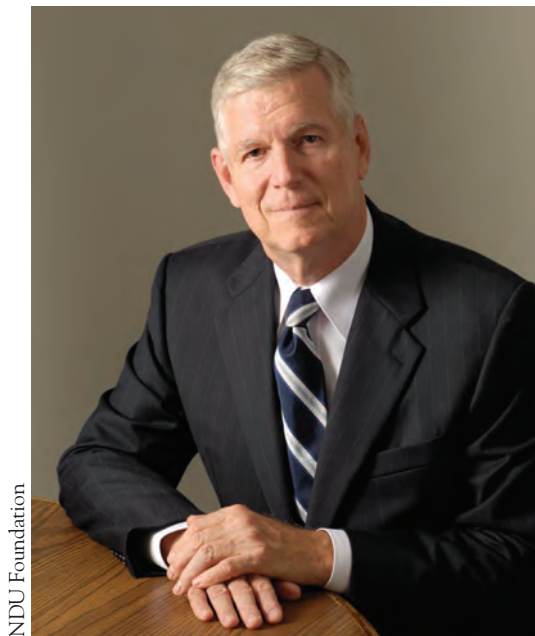


# An Interview with Richard B. Myers



NDU Foundation

*In 2003, did you believe that Iraq posed a clear and present national security threat to the United States?*

**General Myers:** The fact that everybody thought Iraq had WMD [weapons of mass destruction] made [it] a threat because of the nexus between WMD and violent extremists.

*If you had known that Saddam Hussein did not have WMD at that time,*

*would you have advised the President against invading Iraq?*

**General Myers:** I think so, but the President's and everybody's rationale was that the nexus between WMD and violent extremists constituted a clear and present threat. There were fringes that had other theories that have taken over the political debate and made it vitriolic; for example, people say, "You went in there for the oil." No, we went in there because he had WMD, and we didn't think it would be a good thing if [these weapons] fell into the hands of others at a time Iraq was supporting violent extremism. You can't deny that support when Iraq was giving \$25,000 to families of terrorists who martyred themselves in Israel, so that was the rationale.

*According to the Powell Doctrine, among the questions you should ask before committing troops are "Is there a vital national security threat? Is there a clear and obtainable objective?" And "Is there broad international support?" Do you feel that you had a clear objective?*

**General Myers:** It's interesting that someone, especially someone who was in the military when he did that, thinks that you can establish

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a “doctrine” for the President to follow. The President makes these decisions. You can have it in the back of your mind that “Okay, we better have a pretty clear mission here before,” but the President in the end will decide, and the President may decide that’s not important. I think those are good principles—great principles actually. And I think we did have a pretty good way forward, but you have to remember in all this we can have the best way forward in the world, but we are just one part of the equation. There are other parts of the equation that you don’t have any control over, and you can think about it and so forth, but in the end, the other variables play a part, too. We had a plan with an end in sight, and it turned out to be more complex. Here we are 10 years later. We are where I thought we’d be earlier, but still a place where they have a constitution; they’ve elected a government. It’s not the government we would necessarily pick, but they’ve started the process we wished them to start.

*There was a State Department effort prior to the invasion, the Future of Iraq Project. Why was that plan not brought in or not used as a template for building a plan or used as a stepping stone?*

**General Myers:** That’s a good question. I don’t know. What we often find in the U.S. Government—at least in this particular case—is that there were a lot of bodies, not at the Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell levels, but below that, where there was an attitude of “anything coming out of Defense, we don’t want to hear about,” or “anything coming out of State, we don’t want to hear about.” Not with the military; this is civilian to civilian, bureaucracy to bureaucracy, below the level of the principals, but it goes on and that’s not helpful. That’s one

of the issues I think we have in our government. We don’t have a good mechanism to focus all of our instruments of national power on a problem. You can argue, as I did as Chairman, that in Iraq the military instrument would be predominant in the early stages of major combat and perhaps early stages of stability and reconstruction, but then these other instruments of national power—the diplomacy, economic, informational—have to play their roles as well. It’s really frustrating that we couldn’t harness these in a way to focus more effectively in Iraq.

*And do you believe that was because of institutional rivalries?*

**General Myers:** It’s a combination. There are clearly some in our government who did not buy into what was going on in Iraq, and there were also departments and agencies that were not well-resourced. Let’s think about this for a minute: the Department of Justice was picked to “go stand up a new judiciary inside Iraq.” They don’t have people sitting around the Justice Department with their bags packed ready to go to a worldwide contingency. That’s not what they do. Their focus is on the United States. So we were asking Justice to take people out of their domestic responsibilities for a foreign mission. No doubt that important domestic positions would go unmanned to support that.

When they stood up the Coalition Provisional Authority [CPA], it was supposed to be manned with civilians. I know it wasn’t fully manned well into its existence, but even a year after [L. Paul] Bremer pulled out, I don’t think it ever got fully manned. It was the military that had to fill in the gaps—partially because the agencies were not making it happen and partially because of resource constraints in

the civilian agencies. If it takes all the instruments of national power to succeed, the civilian agencies have to be resourced in a way that will allow them to do that.

*In these uncertain economic times, do you believe the civilian agencies will be able to get the resources they require to play the role that you describe?*

**General Myers:** I think traditionally they have not for many reasons. I was on a State Department group that Secretary [of State Condoleezza] Rice organized to look at what she called transformational diplomacy. What you find out quickly is that they need more resources, but their relations with Congress are not as robust as, for instance, the Department of Defense's relations with Congress. So there isn't the continuing dialogue to articulate the need. Since I've left office, I think State Department has been plussed up with a considerable amount of personnel and probably budgets as well. My guess is that it is still not sufficient, though, for what they ought to be doing in the world. That's going to be hard, especially in difficult fiscal circumstances.

*In November 2005, after you had left the Joint Staff, the Department of Defense issued Directive 3000.05, which stated that stability operations are a core U.S. military mission and shall be given "priority comparable to combat operations." It then went further to say that whatever requirements the civilian agencies could not meet, the Department of Defense would develop internally—everything from the city planner to the training of the judiciary. Do you think such roles are appropriate for the U.S. military?*

**General Myers:** If you are going to be effective at those types of tasks, you have to be educated and trained. It's hard to believe that we have military members with a lot of extra time to learn another skill set who would be better at it than someone who has developed and worked with these skills in the private sector. The military can do that—we've filled in a lot of places. We had artillerymen and privates developing town councils based on what they learned in high school civics—I've talked to them. It's a great thing, but not a perfect thing. It's a great thing that they were so enthusiastic. It's a great thing the Iraqis were enthusiastic about their guidance as well. And as one said to me up at Walter Reed [Hospital], "Well, in any case, I knew a lot more about it [civics] than they did." Which is true. Apparently, he paid attention to it in high school. But that's not the way it ought to be done. If that's the way we are doing it, I'm not going to criticize it, but I think whoever does it should be educated and trained in the task. Otherwise, we are not going to be effective.

*Do you think it likely the United States will be involved in major stabilization and reconstruction operations involving substantial troop deployments in the near future?*

**General Myers:** That's impossible to know. We are, as the facts bear out, terrible at being able to see what's around the corner. If you are talking about military capabilities and you are the President of the United States, from whatever party, you require a spectrum of response capability from all-out conflict to helping nations in appropriate ways, and you need people trained and ready. But when we look at the issues that are confronting some of these countries, there are a couple

of characteristics that they have in common. For one, they have a huge youth population and usually poor economic situation. I don't know if there is a role for the military, but there certainly is a role for the developed world to help these nations develop in a way that makes them viable international players without fomenting extremism along the way. Economic issues and huge unemployment can certainly spawn extremists and that will have to be part of any grand strategy.

*The 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States stated that America is threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones. Do you believe that that's still true today?*

**General Myers:** That's a good question. I think the greatest threat to America today is from nonstate actors. This doesn't mean nation-states are no longer a threat, but in terms of the ones that are the most immediate. It took 19 people to attack us on 9/11, and that has dictated our actions for 10 years. More than 19 in terms of planning of course, but 19 terrorists carried it off. We still must pay attention to those nation-states that are trying to steal our secrets and deny us access to certain parts of the world. That's all important. With all the unrest, you can have state-on-state conflict; that's clear. But I think the more immediate threats are the nonstate actors.

*Other than al Qaeda, are there others that come to mind?*

**General Myers:** Hezbollah, for sure. They are sponsored by Iran and, as somebody said early on in all this, al Qaeda is a real threat, but

Hezbollah is the real A-Team of terrorist organizations. They've killed Americans and other Westerners before; they are well-organized, and I think a potential threat that needs to be thought about.

*And now they are a part of the Lebanese government.*

**General Myers:** Yes. So how does that bode for the security of Israel when Hezbollah has the backing of Iran which is a terrorist-supporting state? It's not a good sign.

*Given what we know of Iran's possession of WMD, do you think there is a rational argument to be made for a military strike against Iran?*

**General Myers:** I thought initially probably not. Certainly any concept of U.S. boots on the ground in Iran is not appealing. But I don't think we take a military response totally off the table when we are considering all the ways we can deal with the current problem. If the United States and the international community were to decide that a nuclear-armed Iran was a threat to our vital national interests, then certainly military action should be on the table. But it's an evolution of discussion and thought to come to that point.

Then we would have to ask the military, "What can you do, what impact would it have, and what would be the consequences? Can you assure us that through strikes you can delay [Iran's nuclear] program by 1 year, 2 years, 3 years or just 1 week?" Then our decision might be different depending on the answers and anticipated ramifications. What is the potential for Iran to make it difficult to get oil out of the Persian Gulf—which would bring the

world economy to its knees? All this would have to be considered. I don't think military action is something we can just dismiss. I think it's something we have to discuss around the National Security Council table to decide if our vital national interests would be threatened by a nuclear-armed Iran and where that nuclear potential might wind up.

*I'd like to go back to the point you made about the tension between agencies as we were going into Iraq. Another of the goals of the 2002 National Security Strategy was to transform America's national security institutions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Fast forward to today—10 years and a couple of trillion dollars later—do you think that we've done that?*

**General Myers:** My personal opinion is that the national security apparatus that we have today is an outgrowth of the National Security Act of 1947. Though it has been modified five or six times, it is still an act that was born out of our experiences of World War II. So, I say flippantly, that we are perfectly organized for World War II, but we are not particularly well organized for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We see that in the way that we've dealt with the current conflicts. I used to ask people who they thought was in charge of our efforts in Iraq or in Afghanistan. When I talked to civilian audiences, they'd often say, "Oh, well, the Secretary of Defense, Secretary Rumsfeld or Secretary Gates." I would say, "Oh, so he's in charge, he's responsible? What authority does he have over the State Department, National Security Council, Justice, Treasury, Commerce, Homeland Security? What is his authority there?" The answer is that he has no

such authority. So how can you put someone in charge if we're talking about all the instruments of national power focusing to solve a problem when this person "in charge" doesn't have complete authority? We don't have a system that provides a belly-button, or even two belly-buttons, to allow you to say, "They're the ones responsible and they have the authority." You just can't say that about our government in the current conflicts.

*If you were to advise on how to evolve our system, in order to be a more rational responder to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what would your guidance be?*

**General Myers:** There has been some great work done by Jim Locher and others who have looked at this. I did not participate in that work [the Project on National Security Reform], but I know some of the folks who did. They have given serious thought to this question. In my book, *Eyes on the Horizon*, I offered a solution that might be tenable that is not new bureaucracy-building. You can't say the President is in charge because the President has a lot of things to be in charge of. Right now he's worried about our budget, he's worried about our economy, he's worried about jobs, he's worried about health care; there are a lot of issues on his plate in addition to national security. He can't be the one who is responsible and has the authority. Somehow that has to be delegated. I think the threat from violent extremism is sufficient that we should have somebody in charge who has the responsibility and authority to work with the other departments and agencies. Not the tactical control. I'm not saying, "You need a platoon of tanks at 12<sup>th</sup> and Maine in Baghdad." But in developing the strategy and ensuring the resources

are flowing to fulfill that strategy as well as the clout to make it happen. We don't have a system like that.

*Would you then propose something like a "Super-Secretary"? Someone with authority over multiple cabinet agencies?*

**General Myers:** We could do it that way—somebody who doesn't have a whole lot of staff. In the past, it has been fashionable to create a "czar" in the National Security Council. I have a real problem with staff being in charge of anything. We need somebody who is, I'll use "in command" in the military parlance, somebody who is in charge and knows he's in charge and has the authority to make things happen so he can be held accountable. When it doesn't go right, we can say, "Hey!" the President says to the new person in charge, "I thought we were going to do this." "We were, but Defense didn't kick up their resources," or maybe State. Somebody can start working those sorts of issues and then be responsible. I think the threat is sufficiently serious. I'm not just talking about Iraq and Afghanistan, but I think the threat is beyond those two places; they are merely the current tactical manifestation. There is a larger issue at stake here.

*Returning to the subject of Iraq, in retrospect what is your assessment of the decision of the Coalition Provisional Authority to dismantle the Iraqi Armed Forces?*

**General Myers:** I think at the time it seemed reasonable, although that particular decision did not get a good hearing inside the Beltway. There was not a good discussion by the policy folks on that particular decision. My understanding was that it was a decision the

CPA sort of preformed and just did it. You can argue it a couple ways: It was always the plan to keep the young conscripts around to do real work. On the other hand, there were a lot of generals in that army that could never be a part of what was to follow in Iraq because they had too much blood on their hands, most of them Sunni. That was never going to sit well with the Shi'a or Kurds. The CPA thought otherwise. I wish we'd had more of a policy debate of some kind, but CPA just did it.

*It left us with a situation where we had to rebuild the Iraqi Armed Forces.*

**General Myers:** We were probably going to have to do that anyway because the leadership was not going to be acceptable. A lot of the acceptable soldiers did come back. I don't think the notion that we had a ready-made armed force was realistic if you are talking about conscripts; their hearts weren't in it. We were going to have to invest in a lot of training anyway, and equipping, because they didn't have much. When it was all said and done, we took care of a lot of it.

*In Afghanistan, we are rebuilding the Afghan National Security Forces. The military side seems to be going fairly well. The law enforcement side doesn't seem to be going quite as well. Any insights as to why it seems more difficult for us to train law enforcement forces than a military force?*

**General Myers:** We're not used to training law enforcement. That's traditionally a State Department task. Right as I was leaving office, the President decided that the Department of Defense would have that mission in Iraq because we were already doing the training,



and we were the ones who were frustrated that it wasn't going as fast as it should be going. It's a skill set normally brought in from the international community and usually from those countries that have national police forces. Part of the problem is that police are local. Your army and air force are probably not. Once police are trained, they go back to a local setting where the corruption and local pressures, even though they are newly trained and enthusiastic, remain the same. They are pressured to do things that perhaps aren't the right things. I think it has a lot to do with geography. It ought to be the national police forces providing local security in both countries, not the army, which should be focused outward. Unfortunately, we seem a long way from that.

*Some people have argued that we've lost a lot of time in Afghanistan. Do you think that our preoccupation with Iraq from 2003 to 2008 set us back in Afghanistan?*

**General Myers:** I'm not sure if I agree with that. Certainly we were concerned about Iraq and gave it a lot of attention. On the other hand, look what was happening in Afghanistan, at least up to about 2008; a constitution was adopted, elections—secure enough to be fairly peaceful elections. President [Hamid] Karzai was a pretty good president, and the Taliban were not a threat to the central government. The question was, to me at least, whether we would be in a big hurry in Afghanistan and spending a lot of U.S. resources. We were training at a pretty rapid rate anyway, but should we double that? I think the allocation of resources between Iraq and Afghanistan was about right. I don't know when the intelligence kicked in, but our intelligence never told us that the Taliban were

regrouping and that they were going to be a threat to the central government pretty soon. All of a sudden they were, and we had to take different action.

You have to have some knowledge of what's happening. If we didn't have enough intelligence folks on the ground in Afghanistan finding out what was going on because they were all being utilized in Iraq, that's a factor to consider. I don't know. There was always this notion that I held that you want to help these countries, but you can't do it all for them. It's the old dilemma: How long and how many resources do I bring to their aid and when do I start withdrawing so they can stand on their own two feet? You have to consider the taxpayer in this, local capabilities and all that. When people say we just weren't paying attention, maybe the intelligence wasn't paying attention, but actually things in Afghanistan were moving pretty well by Afghanistan standards until the Taliban became a threat. I remember when I first heard the Taliban were in resurgence, several years after I retired, I began thinking somebody's not reporting this right because it just wasn't anything I had even worried about. But apparently the Taliban regrouped and became a factor to the point where we are experiencing large-unit conflict. More force-on-force than we'd had before which is kind of a new development this time around.

*More force-on-force than in Iraq?*

**General Myers:** I think so. Al Qaeda in Iraq would do things like they always do—it wasn't force-on-force, squad-on-squad. In Afghanistan, you didn't see this stuff early on. This time around, they're better trained, they actually exhibit pretty good tactical prowess.

## MYERS

Their [tactics, techniques, and procedures] are pretty good.

### *How do you see the end of the Afghanistan War?*

**General Myers:** For me it ends when the Taliban are no longer a threat to the stability and security of the central government. There are always going to be Taliban around. The end is when the central government can deliver goods and services to the provinces without threat. A lot of that is up to Afghanistan; they have to shoulder the load. Right now there are lots of questions. Some say President Karzai can still do the job. Others have already dismissed him and that's too bad. This kind of debate shouldn't be taking place in public. If we are critical of the Afghan government, we ought to do it in private and be supportive to get them ready for their tasks. If we are successful in thwarting the Taliban to the point where the Afghan government doesn't have to worry about its legitimacy and its ability to provide goods and services, that's success. I think it will take a long time and we will be training Afghan security forces for perhaps a long time. I don't necessarily believe its going to require the massive forces that we have there today. Having said that, one of the questions in all this is Pakistan. I don't believe we are going to have a secure Afghanistan, one where we can steadily reduce our forces, as long as Pakistan is a safe haven for the Taliban. It's just not possible in my view.

*Everything you read about counterinsurgency suggests that it is a long-term process and that it cannot be done in one night. Yet here in the United States we have a short attention span. Do you think we*

*can ever be a successful counterinsurgency practitioner as a country?*

**General Myers:** History tells us that most counterinsurgencies run 8 to 10 years or something like that. If we look at Vietnam, if we look at the last 10 years, if the importance of being involved can be described by our senior leadership to the American people in a way that makes sense to them, almost anything is possible, but it has to be seen in our vital national interest. President Bush and President Obama both said clearly that it is in our national interest to have a secure and stable Afghanistan; otherwise, we are going to see more of what we saw on 9/11. It's up to the President to convince the American people that this is in our national interest and dedicate the resources to it. There is always a tension and there ought to be.

*In situations such as Afghanistan and Iraq, do you think there is a blurring of the lines between combatants and noncombatants—as in “farmer by day, Taliban by night”?*

**General Myers:** In any insurgency, we have that issue. That's what makes fighting an insurgency so tough. It's important for the United States, given our values and the way the world looks to us to uphold those values, but we have to be cautious when we go into combat in those kinds of situations—cautious in the sense that we need to avoid as much collateral damage and civilian deaths or injuries as we can. It is after all conflict, so it's not always going to be possible, but it's a special burden. All-out war is one thing, but this is a special burden when the enemy could be a child or a woman with bombs strapped to them. We have to make



these judgments to show that we have this high set of moral values and at the same time carry out our duties.

*Do you think that the laws of war themselves are in need of an update to be able to account for such nuances?*

**General Myers:** Personally, no. I think they are adequate for the task. They put a huge burden on international coalitions in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and particularly on the U.S. military. Some countries are out front fighting, and some countries are keeping the fires at the forward operating bases burning. For those who are out front, it puts a huge burden on the young and middle-aged men and women; I don't deny that. I think the law of armed conflict is appropriate. I don't know how we'd change it. You wouldn't make it easier to kill civilians, I don't think. I think we can train and educate our people, and they've responded pretty well. So, no, I don't think it will change.

*What do you think is the future for complex operations?*

**General Myers:** In the past, we had military operations followed by other things. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there were phases where there were more military, but quickly within a matter of weeks, we needed to bring to bear all the instruments of national power. That's why this whole idea of "Are we organized properly to develop that?" came from. I don't think we're going to see the sequential application of our national and international instruments of power. I see the trend going into the future of more simultaneous application of all instruments of national power, which means the planning capabilities between our various departments and agencies in this government and with our friends and allies need to be a lot more robust than they are today. **PRISM**